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Carter Denies Directing Disclosure of Stealth Program

By RICHARD BURT

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WASHINGTON, Sept. 20 — President Carter denied today that he or his staff had authorized the disclosure of information on the highly secret Air Force program to develop a radar-resistant aircraft, and said that the Attorney General's office had been ordered to investigate the matter.

In a letter to Representative Samuel S. Stratton, Democrat of upstate New York, Mr. Carter termed the Air Force pro-

gram, known as Stealth, "a major technological breakthrough." Mr. Carter said that early in his Administration, he ordered the Defense Department "to maintain the security of the Stealth program as tightly as possible." He added, "I can and do state unequivocally that neither I, nor any member of the White House staff acting under my direction or authorization, have engaged in or authorized the leaking of classified information concerning the Stealth program."

Meanwhile, a high-ranking defense official, who asked not to be identified, said that Secretary of Defense Harold Brown told a group of aides last month that, prior to the disclosures, the Administration was planning to unveil the existence of the Stealth project late this month.

Mr. Carter's letter is designed to defuse the political controversy that developed last month when Mr. Brown, at a news conference, confirmed that the United States was building a new generation of experimental aircraft nearly invisible to Soviet radar. Mr. Brown and White House aides said the Administration was forced to acknowledge the program's existence after accounts of the project appeared in newspapers and on television news programs.

Political Motive Alleged

However, in hearings in recent weeks held by the House Armed Services investigations subcommittee, which Mr. Stratton heads, political opponents of Mr. Carter have charged that Mr. Brown's news conference was meant to enhance the Administration's image on military preparedness. In private, several Pentagon aides have said that Mr. Brown could have refused comment on the news articles.

There have been suggestions, from Adm. Elmo R. Zumwalt Jr., retired, and others, that the White House ordered Mr. Brown to disclose the research program as part of campaign to counter criticism from Ronald Reagan, the Republican Presidential nominee, of Mr. Carter's military record. Admiral Zumwalt, former Chief of Naval Operations, is an adviser to the Reagan campaign.

In addition to denying that the White House had any role in the original disclosures concerning Stealth, Mr. Carter also told Mr. Stratton that the decision to acknowledge the project's existence had been made by Secretary Brown. Mr. Carter said Mr. Brown had been given full responsibility for the program, "including its classification and security aspects."

Mr. Carter said that on Aug. 17, when Mr. Brown told him of his plan to acknowledge the existence of the program, "I agreed with that decision."

Mr. Carter added, "I did not direct him to take that step, but I approved it then, and continue to believe that his judgment in this matter was correct."

Congressional aides said Mr. Carter's letter would probably relieve some of the doubts on Capitol Hill about the White House role in the matter, but they said that additional questions still had to be resolved. For instance, they said, the rationale for Mr. Brown's decision to hold a news conference on the secret program remained unclear.